

Are You Stressed Out?

by Mark Goulston, M.D.

Are you feeling stressed out? If so, you're not alone. The quiz below will help you assess your own stress levels.

Start by circling all of the items that apply to you.

1. I find myself less eager to go back to work or to resume my chores after a weekend.
2. I feel less and less patient and/or sympathetic listening to other people's problems.
3. I ask more "closed-ended" questions to discourage dialogue with friends and co-workers than "open-ended" ones to encourage it.
4. I try to get away from people as soon as I can.
5. My dedication to work, exercise, diet, and friendships is waning.
6. I am falling further behind in many of the responsibilities in my life.
7. I am losing my sense of humor.
8. I find it more and more difficult to see people socially.
9. I feel tired most of the time.
10. I don't seem to have much fun anymore.
11. I feel trapped.
12. I know what will make me feel better, but I just can't push myself to do it and I'll "Yes, but..." any suggestions that people make.

Now, add up the number of items you circled, and check your score below:

- 0 to 3: More exhausted than stressed out
- 4 to 6: Beginning to stress out
- 7 to 9: Possibly stressed out
- 10 to 12: Probably stressed out

What Causes Stress?

Stress develops when you have more pressure on you than you are able to handle. By itself, stress is not necessarily bad or harmful. In fact, some stress may be necessary to help get you motivated and mobilized.

It's when stress turns into *distress* that you begin to really

suffer. Distress occurs when you shift from focusing on a goal to merely finding the easiest and quickest way to resolve the situation. Rather than proactively preventing problems, you begin to react to the circumstances around you.

While such reactions help you feel better for the moment, they don't improve your life in the long run. For instance, you may procrastinate doing something because you believe you'll be able to handle it next week. But the more you procrastinate, the more difficult it is to eventually do what you're putting off.

To make matters worse, the more you fall behind, the more you lower your

confidence and self-esteem. The less confident and worthwhile you feel, the less pressure it takes to feel stress in the first place—thus repeating the cycle each time you experience these feelings.

Coping With Stress

Once stress becomes distress, it's like trying to stop a 747 taxiing down the runway. It's much easier to stop it before it moves too far.

You are most motivated to deal with stress when you're faced with the negative consequences of a hasty, impulsive action. The next time this happens, resist

the temptation to beat up

on yourself. Instead, take out an index card and write down, "If I had this stressful situation to deal with again, what I would have done differently is - - -."

Put the index card in your purse or wallet and commit to acting differently when you're faced with stress. You may not actually change your behavior during your *next* stressful situation, but sooner or later you will. In fact, just reacting to the current situation in this constructive fashion will help you feel better immediately.

Dr. Goulston is a UCLA professor and author of Get Out of Your Own Way at Work...and Help Others Do the Same (c) 2006 Perigee.

